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TAGS: PGOV KDEM PTER LE SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: DAS DIBBLE MEETING WITH WALID JUMBLATT --
NO OBJECTION TO AOUN IN THE CABINET, NO ALTERNATIVE TO
MAKING NICE WITH HIZBALLAH

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, defending (somewhat sheepishly) his public support for Hizballah, claimed to NEA DAS Dibble that doing so was the only obvious way to "cool down" Hizballah and "bring them inside." While this may involve paying lip service to Hizballah's loopy claim to the "Seven Villages" in northern Israel, it does not, for Jumblatt, require caving in to Hizballah's demand to name the new Foreign Minister. This demand was probably part of a game aimed at scuttling Prime Minister-designate Siniora's Cabinet-formation efforts in the short run, and U.S. policy in the Middle East in the long run. Jumblatt sees his Druze confederate Marwan Hamadeh as a good "compromise candidate" for Foreign Minister. He denied opposing participation in the new Cabinet by Michel Aoun's bloc, saying Aoun should get a "fair share" that could even include the Justice Ministry.
End summary.

"Cooling down" Hizballah...

¶2. (S) Visiting NEA DAS Elizabeth Dibble, accompanied by Ambassador and poloff, called on Jumblatt at his ancestral residence in the Chouf Mountains on July 7. In contrast with our most recent visits with him -- when concerns about his own physical safety appeared to be taking an emotional toll on him -- Jumblatt was relaxed and in good spirits. He said he had received no threat information recently, other than that passed to him by the Embassy. He planned to visit Paris shortly, where he might meet with former Syrian Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam, assuming that Khaddam were to be "allowed" out of Syria.

¶3. (C) Regarding a possible visit to Washington, Jumblatt said, "If you invite me, I'll go." When DAS Dibble pointed out that some of Jumblatt's recent public statements about Hizballah made an official invitation problematic, Jumblatt shrugged, waved his hands in a "what-can-I-do?" gesture, and said, "If you have any way of disarming Hizballah without cooling them down, please let me know." In any event, he would "wait for the appropriate moment" for a trip to Washington.

... so as to bring them "inside"

¶4. (C) Continuing on Hizballah, Jumblatt said that the only way of dealing with them was to "bring them slowly inside." This apparently even required going to extremes, such as

defending Hizballah's astounding claim that the so-called "Seven Villages" in northern Israel are on Lebanese territory. When put on the spot for publicly defending Hizballah's claim, Jumblatt laughed sheepishly, as if caught in the act. "Okay, okay," he said, waving his hands, "we've got to say it."

¶15. (C) Disarming and integrating Hizballah would take time, according to Jumblatt. For perspective, he advised, "look at the much simpler example of (Northern) Ireland." He agreed that there might be some useful lessons in the experience of disarmament of other Lebanese militias in the early 1990s, following the end of the Lebanese civil war. He pointed out, however, that these militias -- his own included -- had no choice in the matter. The Syrians were the dominant military power in Lebanon, "they were everywhere," and they effectively dictated the terms for each militia's disarmament.

¶16. (C) Hizballah's justification for keeping its weapons, according to Jumblatt, rested on the assumption that its arms were necessary for the defense of Lebanon, not exclusively for the defense of the Shi'a community in Lebanon (the latter idea was "ridiculous"). Resolving the issue of the Shebaa Farms could therefore be a useful way of triggering a reaction in national opinion, leading the public to conclude that Hizballah no longer had an excuse for remaining armed. An internationally-accepted demarcation of Lebanon's borders would help in this respect, Jumblatt said. Such a project should apply not only to the Shebaa Farms, but to other parts of the border as well, he added.

Not supporting Hizballah's Foreign Minister gambit

¶17. (C) Jumblatt distanced himself from Hizballah's demand to name the Foreign Minister as a condition for backing any Cabinet formed by Prime Minister-designate Fouad Siniora. He personally had no problem with his confederate Marwan Hamadeh taking the job. Hamadeh could be a "compromise candidate," since Siniora's top choice, Fouad Boutros, was arguably too elderly for the job. Jumblatt had at first considered Lebanese Ambassador to London Jihad Mourtada, one of the names that Hizballah has put forward, to be "excellent." Jumblatt said he had second thoughts, however, upon hearing that that Mourtada enjoyed personal ties to Syrian intelligence chief Assef Shawkat.

¶18. (C) Jumblatt confessed that the fact that he opposed UNSCR 1559 made it a bit awkward for him to support Hamadeh, who presumably would be more forward-leaning on the issue. Hizballah did not trust Hamadeh, according to Jumblatt: they see him (he laughed) as "too pro-American." Jumblatt was pleased that ("thanks to you," he told the Ambassador and DAS Dibble) the international community, the Syrians had withdrawn from Lebanon. However, he was reluctant to pursue implementation of UNSCR 1559 as it related to the disarmament of Hizballah. "I don't think it helps" for the time being to emphasize this aspect of UNSCR 1559, he said.

¶19. (C) Jumblatt agreed that having Hamadeh, a fellow Druze, as Foreign Minister, would be a useful way of breaking a precedent imposed by the SARG during the post-Ta'ef period. According to this precedent, the four "sovereign ministries" -- Foreign Affairs, Defense, Interior, and Finance -- must be divided among Lebanon's four so-called "great communities," that is, the Maronites, Sunnis, Shi'as, and Greek Orthodox. This had never been the case until Ta'ef, he said. (Note: For example, Jumblatt's father, Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt, served as Interior Minister.)

¶10. (C) Hizballah's demand for control of the Foreign Ministry aside, Jumblatt argued that it was useful for Hizballah to have participants in the next Cabinet. That way, a figure like Fouad Boutros, as Foreign Minister, would be seen as representing a national consensus on issues such as UNSCR 1559, rather than simply his personal point of view.

Such was the discouraging reality of Lebanon's consensus-driven, confessional system, where "you win a majority (in Parliament) and then you have to share with the others," he said. It was "a joke."

Aoun in the Cabinet? "Ahlan wa sahlan."

¶11. (C) Jumblatt rebuffed the widespread perception that he was blocking the participation of Aoun's bloc in a new Cabinet. Aoun should get a "fair share" in the Cabinet. "Let him take the Ministry of Justice," Jumblatt said, referring to Aoun's condition for participation. Jumblatt claimed to have made this clear to Siniora, and to have instructed his own representatives, Ghazi al-Aridi and Wa'el Abou Faour, to tone down their criticism of Aoun.

¶12. (C) No fan of Aoun, Jumblatt held out hope that giving Aoun some responsibilities of government would make him a more constructive player. "I have my doubts," however, that Aoun was serious about working constructively with a new Cabinet. He could "better serve Lahoud and Syria" by remaining outside, as an opposition leader, appealing to what Jumblatt alleged was a traditional yearning of Lebanese Christians, particularly the Maronites, for a strongman.

Security and other challenges for the next Cabinet

¶13. (C) That said, Jumblatt personally would not want to be responsible for the Interior Ministry these days. There was too much the next Interior Minister would have to do to "clean up after the Murrs" (father-and-son former Interior Ministers Michel Murr and Elias Murr). Currently, internal security functions were very decentralized and inefficient. The army's G-2 was reporting exclusively to the army's commander. The Surete-Generale was "headless." It was not clear what, if anything, the State Security agency was doing these days. A hard task of restructuring the security services and determining a division of labor among them lay ahead, according to Jumblatt.

Is Jumblatt's side being set up to fail?

¶14. (C) Besides internal security, the next Cabinet would have many other difficult tasks ahead of it, particularly in the economy. Jumblatt feared that, "our adversaries are waiting for us to stumble." Was Hizballah's Foreign Ministry demand just part of a game, the goal of which was to make Siniora's Cabinet-formation efforts fail and bring Najib Mikati back as Prime Minister? "I'm afraid so," Jumblatt said. This, he argued, led back to the question of President Emile Lahoud. As long as Lahoud remained in office, as the "official representative of the Syrian presence in Lebanon," this would be a problem.

¶15. (C) If this was all a "game," what stake did Hizballah have in it? "They're just waiting for U.S. policy in the Middle East to fail," Jumblatt answered. Hizballah, together with the SARG and the Iranian regime, had pinned its hopes on the prospect of U.S. failure in, and disengagement from, Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine. He suggested that the USG nonetheless try to start a dialogue with Hizballah. At the very least, talking to Shi'a fundamentalists held more promise than attempting to dialogue with the "horrible monsters" who represented militant Islam in the Sunni community: Wahhabists, the Taliban, and the like.

Syrians not out, not yet...

¶16. (C) Jumblatt insisted that it was "not true that the Syrians are out." The SARG continued to influence events in

Lebanon through proxies, now that its military presence and overt intelligence presence had been withdrawn. Hizballah was the most prominent proxy. Others included the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command; the Ahbash ("Ethiopians"), a traditionalist Islamic group; and traditionally Damascus-aligned politicians like Talal Arslan and Suleiman Franjeh. As for the goal of "normal" Syrian-Lebanese relations, Jumblatt simply laughed and said, "We never had it before!"

¶17. (C) Jumblatt was asked why Hizballah supported his candidate list in the Baabda-Aley district. (Note: Hizballah controlled enough votes to tip the balance between the Jumblatt-led list, which included the Lebanese Forces as well as a Hizballah candidate, and an Aoun-backed list that included Jumblatt's arch-rival in the Druze community, Talal Arslan. End note.) Given the distaste that the SARG, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in particular, apparently have for Jumblatt, this seemed to belie the assertion that Hizballah is still a Syrian proxy. Jumblatt said the answer was simply that, "They (Hizballah) trust me." Hizballah did not trust Arslan and Aoun, he claimed.

¶18. (C) Jumblatt expressed puzzlement at the recent stream of press reports claiming that Syrian authorities have clashed with Islamic militants (supposedly on their way to Lebanon) as well as former Iraqi regime elements inside Syria. He wondered if the reports were "a kind of message," from the SARG, one along the lines of, "We left Lebanon, now the fundamentalists are on the loose," "We were protecting the Christians," and so on. If the reports were true, it appeared that Syria was in a period of instability unseen since the Muslim Brotherhood's uprising in the early 1980s. It was all "very strange," he said.

Comment

¶19. (C) Jumblatt appeared ready to play a much more constructive role in Cabinet-formation efforts than his recent, provocative attacks on Aoun suggested. While that barrier may have been removed, Hizballah's own demands, backed by Speaker of Parliament and Amal Movement leader Berri, and made in the name of the entire Shi'a community, may yet pose an insurmountable obstacle to Prime Minister-designate Siniora's efforts.

¶20. (S) Comment, continued: Jumblatt's personal opinion about UNSCR 1559 aside, his approach to Hizballah indicates a basic problem in Lebanese politics, one that will continue as long as UNSCR 1559 remains less than fully implemented. One reason why Jumblatt, among so many other political figures, is reluctant to challenge Hizballah is because Hizballah is armed and he is not. Hizballah's apologists never tire of claiming that Hizballah has never used its arms against fellow Lebanese, something that sets it apart from civil war-era militias. (This is factually incorrect, but that is another story.) Many Lebanese leaders are nonetheless frankly afraid of Hizballah. Jumblatt has previously expressed suspicions about Hizballah's possible role in Rafiq Hariri's assassination, and has also feared being assassinated himself, with the SARG using Hizballah, or an element of Hizballah, as the instrument. With this power of coercion and intimidation at its disposal, Hizballah can continue to make unreasonable demands -- whether about the "Seven Villages" or the shape of the Cabinet -- and too few Lebanese will object. End comment.

¶21. (U) NEA DAS Elizabeth Dibble cleared this message.

FELTMAN